

Walking 101

First Steps Toward a Healthy Lifestyle

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, the average person walks between 2,500 to 5,000 steps a day. Although this may seem like a lot, you might want to consider increasing your amount of steps by starting an exercise program. Not only will exercise help you become more physically fit, but it will also improve your overall quality of life.

Starting a walking program is the easiest way to introduce more exercise in your daily routine. Benefits of aerobic walking include: a healthier heart, healthy muscles, bones and joints and an increased burning of calories. The long-term benefits of exercise will reduce heart disease, high blood pressure and obesity. Walking can also relieve pain in those who have arthritis and back pain. Individuals who have illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes or asthma should consult their primary care physician before starting an exercise program.

“Moderation is the key for any individual wanting to increase their cardiovascular workout,” says sports medicine physician, Dr. Scott Gudeman. “It’s important to have a game plan. If you don’t have the knowledge to formulate a game plan, seek out resources, such as your local YMCA. Patience and moderation in your approach to exercise, in addition to having a game plan, will reduce your chance of injuries.”

The first step to taking a moderate approach to your walking program is to add more steps to your everyday activities. Simply taking the stairs rather than the elevator, parking farther away from your destination, or walking instead of driving short distances are three ways to increase your daily steps. If you are unable to walk the recommended 30 minutes a day at a time, break it up in smaller intervals of 10 minutes, 3 times day.

However, to achieve an aerobic workout, you must walk briskly, increasing your pulse and breathing, for a recommended 30 minutes a day. As any exercise, you must first start by warming up. Walk at your normal pace for 5 minutes to get your body moving. Gradually increase your speed so your heart rate and breathing increases. Swing your arms and take long strides as you walk. Make sure your back is straight and your abdomen is flat. Walk at the faster pace for 15 minutes and then cool down by walking at your starting speed for 5 minutes.

As you continue your workout program, slowly and gradually build up speed and intensity. After two weeks of exercising, add 5 minutes to the strenuous part of your walk. As your endurance builds, continue to add five minutes every two weeks. Increasing your exercise slowly and gradually will keep you from pushing your body too far. When people try to do too much at once, chances for injury will increase.

Injuries often occur when you excessively increase the duration and intensity of your workout all at once. Injuries can also occur if you are wearing improper shoes, if you have been previously injured or if you have imbalanced strength or flexibility.

“As an orthopaedic surgeon, I see many patients who develop knee pain soon after starting a walking exercise program,” said Dr. Gudeman.

Like running, walking can be considered a high impact activity, and therefore can cause knee problems. To reduce your chances of knee injuries, avoid rocky or rough terrains and wear comfortable fitness shoes. Remember to stretch before and after a workout to decrease your chance for potential injuries.

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, if an injury should occur during your exercise program, use the first aid procedure for musculoskeletal injuries: Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevate (RICE). Rest the injury and ice it to lessen swelling, bleeding and inflammation. Apply a compression bandage to the injury and elevate above your heart level to reduce swelling.

With summer approaching, many people want to start exercising, but can't find the time to fit it in their busy schedules. You must make the time. Create an exercise schedule, including days off, to eliminate excuses for not working out. By starting an exercise program, you are making a commitment to a lifetime pursuit of being healthy. Once an exercise program is initiated and continued, it will become part of your everyday life.

Tips to keep you motivated:

- Walk with a buddy. It is always easier to workout with someone to keep each other motivated.
- Walk around the mall. Not only are you getting a workout, but you can window shop at the same time.
- Buy a pedometer (counts your steps) and count how many steps you took on a normal day. Then see how many steps you took after adding your walking program. Having a pedometer and tracking your daily steps will help you set goals, and inevitably increase your aerobic output.
- Walk in the morning before work/school. You will get it out of the way so you can relax in the evening.